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New glamour, new Gothic: Australian films in the 1990s

The quota quirky

There are only one or two, at most five, Australian feature films in any one year that a wide cross section of the public sees and that get taken up in subsidiary general public circulation – on radio, on television and in newspaper features. In 1992, it was *Strictly Ballroom* and *Romper Stomper*; in 1994, it was *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, *The Sun of Us*, *Muriel's Wedding*, *Sirens* and *Bad Boy Bubby*. Consequently these come to represent the Australian output and trends in it. This may not be withstanding the fact that they may be untypical of the films released ... But the successes inevitably present themselves as 'touchstone successes' and so find the horizon line of public explanation.¹

Following the appearance and development of generic and stylistic trends in Australian film production during the first two decades of the revival, a different unifying feature has been perceived in the more recent critical and commercial successes. The eccentricity of the humour and narrative situations and the 'quirkiness' of characters are foregrounded as the appealing attributes of individual films (particularly *Strictly Ballroom* (Baz Luhrmann, 1992), *Muriel's Wedding* (P.J. Hogan, 1994) and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994)) and by extension of the Australian industry's product as a whole. Significantly, these three films also examine problematic aspects of ethnic, familial, social and national identity, and resolve them optimistically within their comedic narratives. This concentration, and the films' contemporary settings and relevance, are characteristics shared by other Australian films of the last ten years. The



Bliss

5 new label applied to Australian film in the 1990s underlines the link between its representation of new types of Australian-ness and the popular, commercial-approach to filmmaking engendered by government legislation at the end of the 1980s:

The prospect of a quirky, eccentric cinema to one side of the international norm [exists] as a means of establishing international attractiveness. In *Sweetie* and *Strictly Ballroom*, *Miriel's Wedding* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* a space is created for what has become an international expectation of Australian 'quirkiness', 'eccentricity' and 'individuality'.²

The Australian Film Finance Corporation

An alteration to the ways in which feature films were funded was suggested in the late 1980s, in an effort to counteract the worst

effects of the IOBA legislation. Under the system of attractive tax benefits, productions had been overbudgeted or made without the likelihood (or expectation) of returning a profit on investment. Escalating costs in feature production had, ironically, favoured television work. The television mini-series flourished under IOBA because of the reliance on finance-derived, from-network presales. At the same time, the trend towards commercialism which the benefits system had encouraged had had a disadvantageous effect on other types of film production. In response to these problems, the AFC circulated a discussion document calling for the establishment of a national film bank, which would be responsible for nurturing cultural as well as commercial enterprises:

This bank would make investments in Australian films (as certified by the minister) on a purely commercial basis, but it would be able to scrutinise budgets and control costs in a way not possible under IOBA. After much industry debate and negotiation among the various factions and interests, the government accepted the recommendation of the AFC and established the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) in 1988. Its initial budget was around \$70 million (considerably less than the \$150 million IOBA was estimated to cost the taxpayer annually) and this is to be progressively reduced as its investments begin to generate returns and it becomes self-sufficient.¹

Initially, the Film Finance Corporation's rubric was to act in support of, rather than replace, the funding structures existing under IOBA. Feature films, television films, mini-series and documentaries would receive financial assistance provided they had earned a provisional certificate from the Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment and Territories. However, productions were only eligible for support if they fulfilled certain cultural and financial criteria. A film was deemed eligible if it was 'made wholly or substantially in Australia with significant Australian content; or an official co-production made under a treaty or similar arrangement'; or the funding handled by the Australian Film Development Corporation (AFDC) earlier in the revival, the assistance offered by the AFPC was dependent on a favourable estimation of likely returns from the production. Therefore the AFPC's scrutiny of budgets and scripts was crucial to the assessment of viable presales and distribution deals.³ Ostensibly, the Corporation's operations would rein in the excesses of the preceding era of tax relief and ensure balance in terms of budgets, content and commercial orientation. In practice, its (entirely appropriate) emphasis on popular appeal and guaranteed returns has resulted in economies of an unexpected sort:

In the last five years it has become increasingly difficult to produce and distribute films and programs that do not have what is called a 'robust' market character. This means a presale in an overseas market. The AFCC insists on all projects having a presale of between 35 and 50 per cent of production budgets which tends to mean riskier and more experimental projects have less chance of support. The theatrical market for documentary film is practically non-existent and the television destination for documentary invariably affects the style, theme and length of the project. There is generally less money for the sort of film that used to be funded by the Creative Development Branch of the AFC - short fiction, documentary, experimental film and women's films.⁶

While attempting to maintain the diversity and representativeness of Australian filmmaking, the AFCC was tasked with fostering responsible and responsive economic and commercial approaches to production. Generically based productions promised the likelihood of popular success, but a close, contemporary cultural relevance, securing the recognition of the local audience, might also contribute to healthy returns from the Australian box office. Such representations of modern Australia, distinct from the gentility of plattitudinous period-based dramas, might also provoke a re-orientation of perceptions of Australianness at home and overseas in the years following the 1988 Bicentennial. Many of the films produced in the 1990s, including those not financed by the AFCC, are derived from generic bases, but these conventionalised forms are chosen to be breached as often as observed. In developing, transforming or hybridising existing generic forms (the Australian Gothic and the rite of passage, and the American road movie and musical), recent Australian films have constructed a new image for the industry and the country, propagated through commercially successful, but nonetheless self-conscious and self-reflexive products.

New Gothic

Several Australian films of the 1990s incorporate Gothic elements, and often exaggerate the irony, black humour and reflexive characteristics exhibited by Gothic films of the 1970s and 1980s. They share a similar concentration on an isolated and unusual central protagonist, and examine the gradual and/or traumatic revelation of their true circumstances. In the course of this analysis, the modern urban environment is comprehensively deconstructed and defamiliarised. The antecedent of 1990s Gothic films in this respect is *Bliss* (Ray Lawrence, 1985), adapted from the novel by Peter Carey.

Bliss follows the experiences of Harry Joy (played by Barry Otto), a husband, father and salesman who returns to life after a fatal heart attack. He discovers that his belief in his world and family has been misplaced, and that his previous, secure existence was an illusion. The vision of heaven and hell which comes to him at his death is transferred into the everyday world, and he tests his friends and relatives to ascertain whether they are demons, or he is mad. His experiences and discoveries range from the comic to the banal to the horrific, as he learns that his wife is unfaithful with the junior partner in his advertising agency, his son is a drug dealer and his daughter an addict, and that his client companies are responsible for life-threatening pollution. Harry's revelation causes him to reject his responsibilities to family and business and wage a moral crusade against consumerism, and he falls in love with Honey Barbara, a redemptive earth-mother figure who offers him a new life in a pastoral idyll. His relatives counter this by having him committed to an insane asylum (evocative of a concentration camp), and he is forced to buy his freedom with acquiescence to his wife's plan to create an advertising campaign for a petroleum company. Barbara leaves him after this second fall and Harry spends eight years in the forest wilderness, learning humility within the natural world and winning back her love.

The transcendental conclusion of the film, with Harry dying again in a blissful old age and diffusing into the trees he has planted, strikes a note of spiritual optimism which seems out of tune with the occasionally horrific and depressive realisations which have preceded Harry's salvation. His traversing of 'heaven and hell, bliss and punishment' is suggestive of a modern pilgrim's progress rather than a contemporary social criticism, despite the environmental message it contains (with characters and the landscape burned and poisoned with petrol). The film's disconcerting shifts in tone and perspective endow its depiction of contemporary life with both black humour and potent criticism. Dismissing the hospital chaplain's reassurances that the idea of hell is 'old-fashioned', Harry recognises that individuals carry their personal hells within themselves. As such, Harry's mental and the family's moral disintegration correspond with the subversion of diegetic verisimilitude and the divergence from conventional narrative form. The buzz of flies accompanies Harry's fears of bodily corruption in hospital, but is also heard over scenes of moral collapse, as when Harry's daughter offers her brother oral sex in exchange for free drugs. Similarly, the faithlessness of Harry's wife Bettina is registered by a joking reference to, and then the physical

appearance of live sardines. The destabilisation of the diegetic world, and the erosion of a reliable perspective on narrative events (despite the voice-over narration given by Harry at the end of his life), reflects Bliss's status as a fantasy text under Todorov's definitions. The inclusion of additional, alternative narratives (such as the opening recitation of the story of 'the vision splendid', and Harry's story of Little Titch told to the police officers) underlines the fluidity of the film's progression and its refusal to be fettered to a single organising perspective. So we can watch Bettina's death (at which Harry is not present), Davey's symbolic assumption of Nazi uniform in his (secret) meeting with his sister, and listen to the restaurant owner's opinions delivered direct to camera (before Harry arrives), in spite of the narrative perspective supposedly being centred on Harry in old age.

Bliss's ability to comment on the perception of social realities is dependent on its dissimilarity to social realism. Old Harry's voice-over first intrudes to inform us that 'this is a story about a fellow who told stories'. Such circumlocution (along with the repetition and appropriation of Harry's monologues in the film) highlights the self-consciousness of the narration within Bliss. Alex Duvall, Harry's colleague who rewrites the conference reports to produce official and honest versions of the week's business, is in effect undertaking the same exercise as Harry: reworking experience and perspective in order to create a better second life, in which immorality and dishonesty are redeemed as spirituality and truth.

Nirvana Street Murder (Aleksi Vellis, 1990) employs similar shifts in tone in its tongue-in-cheek narrative of petty crime and relationships across ethnic divisions. The deliberate mockery of the thriller format is broadcast by the film's disclaiming title: 'The characters, events ... in this motion picture are entirely fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons ... or actual events either past or present is purely a bonus.' The film evokes the long-running Australian television crime series *Homixide* in its title sequence, and also quotes the programme by showing certain characters watching an episode. The titles are accompanied by thriller music, and consist of a sequence of monochromatic images, gradually stained red with blood. Any dramatic tension is, however, defused by the realisation that the images portray the Poowong Abattoirs where brothers Boady (Mark Little) and Luke (Ben Mendelsohn) O'Hagan work. In spite of its lurid title, the crimes the film depicts are haphazard, accidental or mismanaged. Boady holds up a chemist shop, but only to get the \$73 he needs for making speed, and the tablets he needs to control his sleepwalking. The speed he makes

for sale is at first comically ineffective, then dreadfully potent. Other characteristics of the horror genre are included to bathetic effect. The Gothic mansion on Nirvana Street is home not to a Norman Bates, but an elderly lady Luke is required to visit as part of his community service while on probation.

While illustrating the brothers' incompetent criminal activities, the film also addresses the issue of relationships between different ethnic groups within modern multicultural Australia. Luke's Greek girlfriend Helen is blackmailed by another Greek girl, who threatens to tell Helen's parents of their relationship. Helen is already under pressure to accept a suitor of her parents' choosing, but Luke's and Boady's intervention merely starts a feud with the blackmailer's male cousins. The difficulties experienced by immigrant communities, in finding employment and integrating into society, are aired in a comic conversation between the brothers. In response to Boady's incomprehension, of the issues, Luke makes an analogy to a group of shearers suddenly transported to Tokyo and unable to find work. Their dialogue recalls the prosaic wisdom and unwitting comedy of the male ocker character:

Luke They can't speak the lingo, and they get the burn jobs.

Boady Why don't they get a job as shearers?

Luke 'Cos they can't mate, 'cos there's no bloody sheep in Japan!

Boady Why go there if there's no sheep, you dick?

In a further example of the film's deliberate, comic deflation of masculine stereotypes and thriller expectations, the Greek males prove as inept as the Australian brothers in taking their revenge. The chaotic activities of all the characters build towards a climax of unpremeditated, tragic-comic violence. The fake documentary ending title represents the final example of the film's unpredictable handling of tone, convention and audience expectation.

Cappuccino (Anthony Bowman, 1989) also uses the thriller format and the vagaries of voice-over narration in a self-reflexive form. The experiences of a group of actor friends are related by Max, a cab driver by day and would-be stand-up comedian by night. Throughout the film he is seen in close-up as he delivers his narration in a spotlight to an appreciative but unseen audience. Only near the film's conclusion is it revealed that Max has been telling his story not to a club audience, but to listeners in prison cells surrounding his own. Initially Max's world weary voice-over satirises the insecurities and rivalries amongst his friends, as they compete in auditions, win or lose coveted roles on stage or television, and become involved in

romantic entanglements. Maggie (Jeanie Drynan) laments losing custody of 'Sebastian' to her ex-husband in their divorce, and her last afternoon with him is given a clichéd, melodramatic treatment. However, the flashback episode concludes with the revelation that Sebastian is an Alsatian rather than a child.

The actors' circle is expanded by Max's young girlfriend Celia, and by the attentions of a corrupt detective Bollinger, who has left video tapes incriminating the police commissioner in Max's cab. Contact between the characters results in Bollinger and his partner (who 'could be Redford') behaving increasingly like actors and television cops, and in Max's imprisonment, which gives him the opportunity to write his own screenplay. Max is discussing his screenplay, entitled 'Cappuccino', and the parts he has written for his friends (which follow their characters and recent experiences exactly), when Bollinger confronts the group and is shot by Celia. As he dies Maggie walks into the shot, the director calls 'Cut!', and the scene is reshot. Subsequently the camera pulls back to reveal the paraphernalia of set, lights, tracks and technicians. The artificiality of the comedy thriller is parodied in this example in several interrelated ways. Max's voice-over to an audience mocks the laconic retrospective narration of the film Noir detective, though the revelation of Max's imprisonment recalls the ending of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Ray Garnett, 1946). The stereotypical vanity of Max's actor acquaintances is reconfirmed by the ending revealing them to be actors playing actors. The improbabilities of the plot are emphasised by Max's voice-over, only for them to be excused by the admission of artificiality at the film's end. *Cappuccino* toys with the Gothic themes of official corruption and the protagonist's powerlessness, but softens its Gothic thriller sources through its self-conscious, comedic subversion of violence, suspense and stereotyping.

Death in Brunswick (John Ruane, 1990) adopts the Gothic sensibility wholeheartedly in its blackly humorous portrait of individual inadequacy, family authority and racial tension. Carl (Sam Neill) takes a job as a chef in a nightclub run by a Greek family, and is attracted to Sophie (Zoe Carides), who works behind the bar. She is betrothed to Yanni the manager against her wishes, and she begins a secret relationship with Carl. The club bouncer Laurie victimises Carl, and precipitates a fight between Carl and his Turkish kitchen helper Mustafa. Mustafa is killed accidentally, and Carl asks his friend Dave to help him hide the body. Subsequently Sophie and Carl find themselves caught between the feuding Greek and Turkish factions, and between their families

(her traditional father and his pretentious mother), but they survive to be united in marriage.

The squalor in which Carl exists (in his own house and in the club's filthy kitchen) reflect his lack of status and self-esteem. His inability to defend himself deepens his degradation, when it becomes necessary to wallow in putrescence in order to secrete Mustafa's corpse in an already occupied grave. He may seem to deserve being a victim of the circumstances which he does not or cannot alter. Yet his active (but immoral) attempts to improve his lot are rewarded without incrimination. His determination to murder his hectoring mother is reinforced by the discovery that she has been withholding a legacy which would relieve his poverty, but she is incapacitated by a stroke before he can administer the poisoned drink he has made. However, the deadening parental authority cannot be evaded completely: the conclusion shows Carl's wheelchair bound mother present at Sophie and Carl's wedding, with the groom in a neckbrace after being punched by the bride's father.

Ruane's film is less exaggerated, than but similar to examples of contemporary comic-horror films emanating from New Zealand. In *Braindead* (Peter Jackson, 1992), the introverted hero's attraction to his Spanish girlfriend provokes an all-consuming jealousy in his mother, who attempts to literally re-absorb him rather than allow him an adult, sexual existence. As Jackson's protagonist emerges from the containment of womb-like rooms, so Ruane's escapes squalor and inaction into a belated adulthood and relative independence:

This imagines a class of Australian males as fortynish adolescents, built either by their mothers or their wives, content to wallow in filth, and consistently engaging despite their burned-out life styles ... with Carl and Dave and Sophie signalling their strength of character by not overreacting to awful situations, instead greeting each appalling plot turn with a resigned shrug.⁷

Characteristics of the Gothic (in the portrayal of pervasive parental authority, the sudden irruption of doom-laden events, and the disempowered hero) are treated humorously in writer-director Ruane's debut feature. The black comedy and splatstick elements incorporated alongside the contemporary, multicultural context make *Death in Brunswick* a key example of the modernisation and modification of the Gothic aesthetic in later popularised forms. Having been made with the assistance of the AFPC, *Death in Brunswick* went on to become the second highest grossing Australian film at the home box office in 1991.

The third highest grossing film in Australian cinemas in the

same year was *Proof* (Jocelyn Moorhouse, 1991), another writer-directorial debut. The narrative of *Proof* is built on paradoxes of truth and appearance, sight and perception, emanating from the central character Martin, a blind photographer played by Hugo Weaving. Having believed as a child that his mother lied in her descriptions of the world around him, Martin now takes pictures to create a body of incontrovertible evidence substantiating his existence and perception. He asks his friend Andy (Russell Crowe) to describe the pictures he has taken, so that they can be annotated to prove that 'what's in the photograph is what was there'. Martin is pleased by Andy's 'simple, direct and honest' way of describing the pictures, and asks him to continue in this task on a permanent, paid basis. The fragility of communication and comprehension between individuals is exposed when Martin interprets Andy's reply of 'No way' to mean that he refuses to help him, rather than that he refuses to accept payment. Although Martin wants to trust Andy, he is secretive and manipulative in his own relationship with his housekeeper Celia, whose cruelty towards Martin springs from his spurning of her love. When she becomes aware of Martin's preference for and reliance on Andy, Celia plans to ruin their friendship by seducing Andy and forcing him to lie to Martin about the content of a photograph. Her appropriation of Martin's pictures to identify and manipulate Andy provides another example of the partiality of visual perception and interpretation.

The paradoxical exercise of blind photography operates as the film's metaphorical core, since it comments upon the subjective, haphazard and potentially damaging activity of interpreting a personally created, existential world. This is suggested from the title sequence, which consists of a series of Martin's oddly composed, off-centre and unfocused pictures:

Martin's life is anything but the truth. The objective world he claims to record is one that he actively constructs. It is his own composite fiction, and there is a parallel in the way that Celia subverts his photos by building them into her own composite of Andy – not an Andy she objectively sees, but one she creates to use against Martin.*

Martin's insistence on the accurate annotation of his pictures over-values the gift of sight, which the heightening of his other senses has seemed to supersede. His reliance on the vision of others, in addition to doubt in his own sensory perceptions, undermines the solitary independence he seems to want, but cannot endure. His disbelief of his mother's description of the garden is based on his inability to hear the 'man with the rake'

she assures him is there, and this doubt extends to the suspicion that his mother did not die but abandoned him. As a child we see him knocking on her coffin to determine whether it is empty, and as an adult being led to her headstone which is insufficient to convince him of her death.

Martin's bitterness at his isolation fuels his rejection of others, just as his testing of Andy's loyalty is fulfilled by the latter's failure. His desire for the truth contains a concomitant inability to tolerate it, and also reveals the paradoxical behaviour of those closest to him (in his refusal to acknowledge the love which motivates Celia's hate, and the friendship behind Andy's betrayal). While acknowledging the similarities between Moorhouse's film and the treatment of blindness in *Cactus* (Paul Cox, 1986), Jonathan Romney recognises that Martin's engagement with an illusive world and elusive relationships, and his status as a disadvantaged, questing individual, are evocative of the earliest narrative of existential investigation:

Martin's Oedipal drama (what could be more Oedipal than the story of a blind man and his mother?) is presented as the missing piece that 'explains' his relationship to the world, and as such, might seem unsatisfactorily pat. But it too is highly questionable. If we cannot trust photos, how can we trust Martin's remembered past with an idealised mother, in which he himself appears as an idealised child? And within that story is further gap – the absence of Martin's father.*

In attempting to confirm the facts of his past and determine the circumstances of his present, Martin appears as another emblematic, questing Australian protagonist. His physical and emotional vulnerabilities are inseparable from his needs and aspirations, as he seeks to prove himself in spite of his own and others' failings. His scrutiny and judgement of the world compare with those of Bernard (Chris Haywood) in *Golden Braid* (Paul Cox, 1990). The subjective recollection of human history and the mechanical recording of time are suggested by the opening Greenawayesque sequence composed of close-ups of clock faces, pendulums and movements, varying from the ornate and decorative to the dirty and functional. The eccentric music heard over the titles (Johann Albrechtsberger's Concerto for Jew's Harp, Mandora and Orchestra) furthers this contrast, as it provides the counterpoint to the varied and discordant clock chimes. Cox's protagonist repairs watches and clocks, but his obsession with timepieces, their previous owners and their reliability extends to a morbid fascination with fidelity within relationships, especially his affair with the married Theresa. The predictable, mechanical activity of clock movements is contrasted with the hero's incessant absorption in

the past, and its inspiration of his florid fantasy life. Dwelling on past events (the death of a previous lover, the sanctity of earlier financial agreements not honoured by his brother who 'doesn't want to remember', and fantasising over a braid of golden hair he has found secreted in an antique Venetian cabinet) develops from a passion into a sickness, and threatens his present existence. His relationship with the severed but 'complete' braid (compared to other emotional bonds in which 'people only love bits of each other, never the whole person') must be revoked in order for the risky but rewarding connection with Theresa to be realised.

The Oedipal antecedent in sexual and investigative terms appears in *Bad Boy Bobby* (Rolf de Heer, 1993) in a more exaggerated form than that found in *Proof*, but there are other close comparisons to be drawn between Moorhouse's and de Heer's films. In both cases the central protagonist is comparatively unformed and inhabits a defamiliarised world, but Bobby enjoys a prophetic or messianic status similar to that of Harry Joy in *Bliss*. The presence of the Christ-like figure of the naive, unworldly but transcendent thirty-year-old can be traced across *Death in Brunswick* (in which Carl undergoes a redemptive epiphany during an ironic church visit) to *Proof* (with Martin's apparently immaculate conception and his scourging of flesh and dishonesty) to *Bad Boy Bobby* (with its man-child released upon an unknown world in which he offers unwitting hope and salvation to the fallen).

From birth Bobby has been kept imprisoned by his ageing mother Flo, who abuses him mentally, physically and sexually while controlling him with tales of the air laden with 'poison' existing beyond their basement room. His future is determined by the unexpected return of his father, a priest referred to only as 'Pop'. The emotional and spiritual world disowned or negated by his parents is opened to Bobby when he asphyxiates Flo and Pop with clingwrap (to save them from the poison), and wanders off into the city previously hidden from him. His subsequent encounters reveal the perversity and unpredictability of the modern urban environment. His education in immediate survival also incorporates a gradual revelation of the social forces and biological needs which drive the individual and the community. From his first double murder onwards, Bobby is both the innocent victim and heedless perpetrator of mundane yet horrific crimes. He passes through the company of a young couple with their own child, a single upper-class woman and a struggling rock band (who recognise him as the 'Clingwrap Killer') before being arrested and 'rehabilitated' by the police. In this odyssey he sees

or talks to the woman called Angel on three occasions before they meet properly. Her frequent appearances and her physical resemblance to Bobby's mother seem to endow her with an 'every-woman' aura, but she also represents an aspiration for him in terms of his emotional development and socialisation.

Bobby mimics his earliest experiences of cruelty at the hands of his parents in his own treatment of his cat. He learns to handle his second kitten with kindness, and even though this animal is killed by youths this stage of his emotional growth is important as it immediately precedes his association with Angel and her clinic for patients with cerebral palsy. Here he learns love for Angel, and sympathy for Rachel's unrequited love of himself. The other vagaries of existence and love which are revealed to him (the merging of physical and spiritual ecstasy with 'Cherie the Salvo', the call to espouse atheistic humanism from the Scientist, the potted history of religious genocide provided by Paul, the group's lead singer) exemplify the ideological extremes from which Bobby must extrapolate a moderate path.

The eclecticism of Bobby's experience is paralleled by the heterogeneity of the film's reference (symbolic floor paintings for the exposition of religious history, described to Bobby as a series of institutionalised 'clingwrapplings', and allusion to Bernini's sculpture *The Vision of St Theresa* (1647) in the episode with Cherie). This intertextual approach runs over into Bobby's performance with the band, in which his stream of consciousness recycles the words and phrases he has heard in an unwitting commentary. Just as the heightening of noises on the soundtrack and the occasional distortion of the film's images have served to articulate Bobby's defamiliarising perspective on the world, so the verbal fossils of his foreshortened childhood strike an epigrammatic cord with his audience:

Bobby fronts the band with a rant strung together from fragments of the abuse he's undergone. These replays are seized on as catch phrases by the audience, who happily chorus them back waving suitable fetish objects: gas masks, dog-collars and clingfilm.¹⁰

Bobby's assumption of Pop's dress and name is, however, a false elevation to adulthood. Angel and Paul force Bobby to acknowledge his true name and his past actions, before Bobby and Angel can create their idyllic family life. That they and their children live in the shadow of factories still pouring forth poisons reflects the fragile or illusory nature of any individual's bliss in the contemporary world.

The re-orientation of Gothic elements (such as the iniquity of

authority, the fallibility of the hero, and the inconstancy of the given or constructed human world) in films of the 1990s maintains the black humour characteristic of Gothic films of the 1970s. Alongside the defamiliarising Gothic gaze, different examples of individual emphasis and national significance emerge. The thriller and the horror film are parodied in *Nirvana Street Murder* and *Death in Brunswick*, but are given a contemporary pertinence through their portrayal of multicultural tensions. *Proof* and *Bad Boy Bobby* extend the commentary of *Bliss* into an examination of identity readable in specifically Australian terms. The central Oedipal relationships and the problematic journeys of both films' heroes towards the establishment of independent existence provide an analogy to the emergence of a national, rather than colonial, identity for Australia. The hiding of the truth or the denial of the world, or the revelation of the truth of the world, which the protagonists of Lawrence's, Moorhouse's and De Heer's films experience symbolise the arduous task of constructing selfhood in the absence of parental authority figures. In a related biographical drama, David Helfgott, the hero of *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996) suffers under a violent parental authority which leads ultimately to his withdrawal from the world into a mental institution. The father who seeks to withhold the world from his son succeeds only in denying his son's talent to the world. The consistency of this theme and characterisation is borne out by their replication in Peter Weir's latest American film. In the media satire *The Truman Show* (1998), the hero's entire existence and environment are studio fabrications. Recognition of their artificiality is only the first step towards the establishment of an alternative space and mode of behaviour outside the control of self-elected authority. The world for Truman lies beyond the confines of the ersatz island, which as in the case of *Summerfield* (1977) may be taken to represent the Australian continent itself. Realising a new definition of national identity may depend on abandoning the territory plotted and the culture contrived by another (colonial) authority, subjecting the received political and cultural environment to a defamiliarising gaze and the world beyond to an unfamiliar scrutiny.

The rite of passage film

The protagonist undergoing fundamental, formative and traumatic experience, travelling and questing within a country supposedly his own but over which he can exert little control, emerges as a key characteristic of Australian film narratives

across the Gothic, period film and male ensemble cycles of the 1970s and 80s. From the 1980s into the '90s, features foregrounding the rite of passage have forsaken the parabolic, historic settings of the First World War and the aestheticism of the period film to concentrate on the prosaic or unremarkable dilemmas of adolescents and immature adults.

John Dugan's films *The Year My Voice Broke* (1987) and *Firting* (1989) follow the emotional, sexual and educational development of Danny Embling (Noah Taylor), first in his home town on the Southern Tablelands of New South Wales in 1962 and subsequently at boarding school in 1965. His position as an outsider is complicated by his attraction to girls who are also ostracised by the parochial communities of town and school. (The town itself seems to have become even more secluded than its physical isolation suggests by the building of a bypass which depletes the scant through traffic). In comparison with the bullying Danny suffers, Freya Olson, the adopted child of the 'town bike' in the first film, and Thandiwe Adjeewa, a Ugandan refugee in the second, are alienated because of the pervasive, adult prejudices of sexism and racism. Their painful experiences contrast with Danny's more mundane sexual curiosity and disappointment, but contribute crucially to his development to adulthood in exposing the injustices unrecognised in childhood. Freya's hidden parentage is a common but unspoken knowledge within the town: laughter in the pub about visiting Sarah Amery at the house on the hill is tainted by the men's admission of their part in Freya's conception and their abandonment of her teenage mother in childbirth. The community's concoction of a ghost story to hide the secret and explain the derelict house misleads the offspring (Danny, Freya and local tearaway Trevor) into re-enacting the town's tragedy. The revelation of the truth is confirmed by the repetition of previous actions by a younger generation. This lends the narrative an air of both predestination and social authenticity, as the next group of adolescents repeat their parents' mistakes in pursuing the same desires. The inconsequentiality of the activity suggested by the title of *Firting* hides the importance of Danny's and Thandiwe's friendship. Within repressive single-sex boarding schools, they maintain an individual and communal resistance against conservative, adult authority and cliques of their peers:

As in Dugan's earlier film, the narrow parochialisms of the time and place that oppress the outsider are neatly caught, and provide much of the wry humour. Danny, bending over to be beaten, finds himself gazing at a book entitled *The Great Australian Loneliness*, and a young

debater solemnly calls up a supportive list of 'great thinkers': Aristotle, Kant, the Duke of Edinburgh, Sir Robert Menzies ...'

The challenge to conservatism is suggested on the soundtrack by the inclusion of contemporary pop songs, yet Danny's voice-over, despite its retrospectiveness, preserves the immediacy of his youthful ignorance and never imbues the past with forgiving nostalgia. Again, Danny's directionless rebellion is focused by Thandiwe's interest in politics of personal and national significance (the American intervention in Vietnam, and Idi Amin's rise to power in Uganda), as his growing love for her encourages a commitment to the issues arising in a 'much bigger world'. The couple's under-age sexual liaison, coincidentally across racial lines, provokes establishment censure, but the intellectual maturation Thandiwe offers Danny is both more important and potentially disruptive to parochial authority in later decades.

The specific positioning of generations and eras by popular music is foregrounded in *Secrets* (Michael Pattinson, 1992), an Australia-New Zealand co-production. Like Pattinson's earlier thriller success *Ground Zero* (1987), *Secrets* positions its quintet of teenage characters in a enunciated moment of cultural history, framing their experiences with the visit of the Beatles to Melbourne in 1964. Contemporary black and white footage of the crowds outside the group's hotel documents the general 'social misbehaviour' of the younger generation inspired by their arrival. The three girls and two boys are confined together in the hotel basement, after they have broken through the police cordon but failed to find the group's suite. Extrapolating from the official, censorious record of the event, the film's fictional narrative particularises the problems and pressures the teenagers endure, and relates them (as do the characters) to the euphoria or escapism the 'new' music offers. Randolph (Noah Taylor) essays a cool Liverpudlian persona through mimicry of the accent, wardrobe and 'mop top' haircut of his idols, and Didi (Danni Minogue) conflates her Catholic education and fandom by secreting a portrait of Paul McCartney in her Bible. However, the music contains as much disappointment as inspiration. Randolph resents the songs' oversimplification of love, and they offer only temporary release from the dilemmas facing Vicki (Willia O'Neill) and Emily (Beth Champion). Although the group and their music represent the motivation for the teenagers' unplanned rendezvous, this putative shared attachment is superseded by their common (universal) adolescent experiences and the emotional support they can offer to and receive from each other. Danny's illegitimacy and

abandonment, Randolph's shyness, Vicki's unplanned pregnancy and Emily's change of heart about her imminent marriage can be disclosed and discussed within this impromptu peer group. The serendipity and importance of their meeting is underlined by the film's ending. Having failed to see their idols or even attend their concert, the five find themselves transformed into celebrities by their ordeal and are interviewed on television. In order to hide their identities from any watching parents, and in recognition of the benefits they have derived from each other through the night, they swap names before the cameras.

The particular emphasis on female adolescence in *Secrets* is duplicated across numerous other formative dramas in the late 1980s and 1990s. Sexual maturation and social deprivation are linked inextricably in the depiction of the life of the contemporary Aboriginal under-class in *The Fringe Dwellers* (Bruce Beresford, 1986), adapted from the novel by Nene Gar. The efforts of the young heroine Trilby (Kristina Nehm) to escape the inevitabilities of unemployment and teenage pregnancy are undone by the vicissitudes of small-town prejudice and her own and her family's fallibilities. While it imbues Trilby's circumstances with an exemplary and tragic significance, Beresford's film lacks the rancorous and aggressive tone of the comparable portrait of the existence of economically depressed Maoris in *Once Were Warriors* (Lee Tamahori, 1994). Trilby's paralysis echoes that of Mitch (played by Jo Kennedy), who drifts into a relationship with Rex, a petty criminal in *Tender Hooks* (Mary Callaghan, 1988). Her difficulties and disappointments are echoed in the abuse suffered by her friend Gaye at the hands of her fiancé and pimp Tony. Although the pain of the young women's relationships is rendered without sentimentality, their capacity to transcend them is also inferred, by Gaye's departure for a pecuniary marriage in America, and Mitch's humorous rebuttal of the unwelcome attentions of a 'maturer' man. By the film's end she can help to disguise Rex after his prison escape, and smile philosophically at his departure from the city and her life.

A superior rendition of formative experience, which combines the rite of passage with the Gothic and the period film, is found in *Celia* (Ann Turner, 1988). Growing up in the late 1950s, Celia Carmichael (Rebecca Smart) comprehends school rivalries, childhood fantasies and political realities as coexistent and covalent elements of her life, and does not recognise distinctions between them. She likes her next-door neighbours and their children irrespective of their communist affiliations, and similarly hates her uncle John and her cousin Stephanie because of the unjust power

they exert. The centre of her world at the film's opening is her grandmother, and after the latter's death she focuses her affection on her pet rabbit Murgatroyd. Both these attachments have unenviaged significance, in Granny's secret Left-wing sympathies and the analogy in the film's representation and Celia's mind between the Communist infiltration and rabbit infestation of Cold War Australia.

In assuming the subjective perspective of its central character, *Celia* utilises a variety of visual idioms to relate her conflation of imagination and actuality: the nightmares fueled by the reading of James H. Fasset's *The Hobbits* overrun her feud with her father and relatives; public information films about the plague of rabbits are viewed by both conservative and radical families and their offspring during communal cinema trips; and the monochrome and the characters of film thrillers invade the aftermath of the climactic killing:

Celia's world is one of fantasy, the cinema and gang warfare ... Meanwhile the adults in her life are engaged in their own rituals of illicit affairs, hypocrisy, accusation and counter-accusation. These two worlds converge in the cinema ... As well as constructing a strong image, which conveys the mood and texture of small town, 1950s Australia, [Turner] is able to convey how, from a child's point of view, anything appearing on the big screen is as authentic (or fantastic) as anything else. Being unable to distinguish facts from fantasy is part of childhood (and in a reflexive way is also part of cinema). Adults, on the other hand, often fail to distinguish between ideology and reality (for example, Celia's mother) and some even deliberately indulge in mystification (for example, Celia's father and Uncle Bob), often to further their own interests.¹¹

Concentration on Celia's perspective validates her version of events and undermines the parental (specifically male) authority which seeks to browbeat her. As such, the film's representation of the formal and experiential education which Celia receives, leading to a wisdom (and power) belying her years, becomes an inverted reflection of the rite of passage and period film models. Her obduracy in the face of injustice is rewarded with the opportunity for revenge. Killing her uncle is by extension revenge against the government he served and her vindictive father, who also encompasses revenge taken on behalf of her mother, and colludes with her daughter in concealing the crime. The narrative functions credibly as a childhood reverie carried to a logical extreme, and as an allegorical and polemical treatise outstripping the fundamentalism of *My Brilliant Career*:

Is it legitimate to talk of women revolting against the state? Celia is a cute kid with her blonde plaits and her freckles, but she is a rebel, a radical and a leader. [She] turns her dreams into realities yet Turner does not portray her as an over-imaginative child or a psychopath. Instead we are led to believe that murdering her uncle is an entirely natural outcome of the sequence of events and her mother thinks so too.¹²

The privileging of a subjective narrator, within a idiosyncratic and dysfunctional familial and social milieu, is also apparent within *Sweetie* (1989). Jane Campion's debut feature film. The voice-over narration provided by Kay begins with a childhood recollection of the favourite her sister Dawn ('Sweetie') enjoyed, and of the morbid fear of trees which continues to afflict her in adulthood. When Dawn appears at the house Kay shares with her boyfriend Louis, her influence is condemned as disruptive by her sister. Her vivacity attracts Louis, even though she is clearly mentally unstable, but her infantile excess seems no more deranged than Kay's baleful and obsessive reserve. Kay's and Louis' relationship is stalled by her portents of doom before Dawn intrudes, and her pessimism appears no less isolating and immature than Dawn's lively puerility. Campion extends the relationships (and the responsibility) by including the sisters' parents, who are undergoing a trial separation because of the mother Flo's exasperation with the father Gordon's overindulgence of Dawn.

The peripheralisation of the characters from each other and their physical environment is relayed by the use of time-lapse photography and unbalanced and eccentric compositions. Hiding from the child next door, Kay conceals herself behind kitchen cupboards, with only her head showing above the bottom of the frame at the extreme right-hand side. Similarly Kay's and Louis' sexual impasse is illustrated by their motionless feet, on opposite sides of the bed and pushed to the extreme right of the frame. The aberration of Dawn's and Gordon's intimacy is also rendered visually. Flo's importance to Gordon is shown by the shrinking of her face, reflected in a oval hall mirror seen in the middle distance, when she leaves her husband. The self-absorption Gordon has encouraged in Dawn is seen in the exaggeration of her hands in close-up, and the associated diminution of her face in a make-up mirror, as she applies nail varnish. In noting such features alongside the weirdness of the characters and their situation, Steve Jenkins presupposes a stylistic debt to David Lynch's films.¹³ However, in contrast to Lynch's depiction of violent abnormality fermenting beneath mundanity, Campion as writer-director offers an examination of oblique jealousies made manifest, private

convictions grown to public embarrassments, and unremarkable family pressures exaggerated to a fatal conclusion:

[Sweetie] is still 'Dad's real girl' and his 'princess' but he is as lost as she is in self-delusion and denial. Kay has to face her exclusion from their 'special relationship' and also her own collusion with the family's silence around it. We see her catch sight of Sweetie sponging down her father's body in the bath and we see her moment of recognition, the realisation of the family's dirty secret to which she has been privy and of which she is part.¹⁴

The possible interpretation of Sweetie as the symbol of Kay's repressed, disruptive side is complicated by the necessity of the former's removal by death before Kay can commit herself fully to Louis. Rather than a liberation, an exorcism of buried guilt allows Kay to move on, without the elimination of her dread of the hidden, inexorable vitality symbolised by trees.

A more prosaic but no less painful narrative of familial pressures and connections between siblings is found in *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (Gillian Armstrong, 1991). Armstrong's elucidation of individual feminine experience from *My Brilliant Career* onwards reaches a peak in this Rohmer-like tale of misjudgement and infidelity. Previously the director had considered the entrapment for the single woman contained in liberation from and commitment to children (*High Tide* (1987)), and completed a series of documentaries following the lives of three women from their teens into their twenties which explore 'female sex roles, ambitions and attitudes in an Australian working class environment'.¹⁵ In treating the affection, tension and competition between sisters Beth and Vicky, and the latter's attraction to the former's husband Jean Paul, Armstrong delivers a concise chamber drama whose stylistic restraint matches the selective deafness, dumbness and blindness of the family members. The group's cohesion succumbs to a series of crises (Vicky's unplanned pregnancy and abortion, stifling mealtimes and parties, and the breakdown of Beth's and Jean Paul's marriage), and the affair between Vicky and Jean Paul begins when Beth is absent, attempting to patch up her relationship with her father (Bill Hunter) during a driving holiday. Ironically her sister and husband capitalise on the removal of Beth's control over the house while she strives to wear down her father's obstinacy. Resolution of one long-standing family conflict provokes another, which paradoxically also comes to represent a conclusion to unspoken strife:

Just as in *Sweetie*, we are left with the feeling that the bond between sisters, forged as it is within the family, can be so destructive that only death (or, as in the case of Beth and Vicky, estrangement) can

allow at least one sister to flourish. There is a sense in which Beth can now become a good and real mother to [her daughter] Annie whose needs were hitherto overshadowed by the demands of Vicky, the pretend daughter.¹⁶

The ironic inclusion of a (trans)formative journey in *The Last Days of Chez Nous* reflects another strain of generic Australian filmmaking, in which the natural and human landscape and the rite of passage narrative are combined in the indigenisation of an American genre: the road movie.

Australian road movies

Given the initial polarisation of Australian film production towards the extremes of art and commerce, the appearance of Australian road movies might have been predicted in the latter category from an early stage of the revival. However, though road- and car-oriented films did appear from the mid-seventies, with the exception of the *Mad Max* trilogy they did not necessarily exhibit a purely commercial motivation in their scripting or iconography.

In the road movie, the travel undertaken by the protagonists serves as 'a metaphor for life itself, with 'freedom and social mobility' being analogous to 'physical mobility'.¹⁷ Several Australian films reflect both the internationalisation of the national cinema in the adoption of imported generic bases, and the indigenisation of such conventional forms to suit local conditions. *Oz* (Ned Lander, 1981) transplants and modernises the narrative of *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), while *Road Games* (Richard Franklin, 1981) employs American stars in its commercially-oriented horror narrative. However, some notable examples of early Australian road films stress entrapment and stasis rather than liberation through movement, and also address contemporary social and racial issues in the process of emphasising the futility of travel. In *Queensland* (John Ruane, 1976) and *The FJ Holden* (Michael Thornhill, 1977), the symbolic car offers no escape from the suffocation and disillusionment of modern life, in distinct contrast to the anticipated freedom of the rural highways:

The FJ Holden is a suburban road-movie in which the protagonists ... get nowhere, trapped in the maze of Sydney's western suburbs: Bankstown, Panania, Chullora. This is another essential of the Australian landscape, not one that asks through the camera to be claimed by the senses, but one which claims - or at least accommodates - the Australian heart.¹⁸

Against the mythologised but unknown natural landscape, the known but unfulfilling urban environment appears safe but unchallenging. Travel beyond the fringe of cities into the underpopulated land constitutes a freeing, and testing of the (national) character. In *Backroads* (Phillip Noyce, 1977), a critical commentary on social-structures and racial prejudices is contained within the generic format. The friendship between an archetypal white Australian (played by Bill Hunter) and his Aboriginal companion is strained by their travel through the inhospitable, sparsely-populated rural environment. The promise of liberation is sabotaged by their usage of a stolen car, with the sense of entrapment exacerbated by the film's compositions, based on images of the vacant landscape viewed through the car windows. The anticipated flight from authority is undermined by the replication of contemporary social tensions within the microcosm of the car.

In later examples, the social and cultural aspects of the road movie's significance have been advanced alongside generic innovation. *Over the Hill* (George Miller, 1992) depicts the lifestyle of an older, itinerant generation. The 'grey nomads' are travellers of retirement age who trek along the rural back roads as 'middle-class gypsies'. Alma, an American widow (Olympia Dukakis) comes to Sydney uninvited to visit her daughter. Unresolved problems in their relationship cause her to leave on an unplanned trip in a classic American car, renovated by her granddaughter's boyfriend. In the country she meets Dutchy, a divorced, retired dentist, and her experiences (participating in rituals with Aboriginal women, and exploring her own and the car's full potential) reveal the remedy for strained family relationships. However, she discovers she can no longer accept internment in the homes of her children, and returns to the road with Dutchy as her new partner. The film's conclusion, with images of their two vehicles heading towards the sunrise emphasises the transcendence and optimism offered by the motif of movement, but in this example the age and experience of the travellers alter the significance and impact of the generic format.

A more conventional and predictable example of the Australian road movie, again centred on the differences between generations, is seen in *Spider and Rose* (Bill Bennett, 1994). Brad ('Spider'), a young ambulance driver, is detailed to take Rose home to her son's farm by road on his last day before leaving the service. Her obstinacy and his resentment of this unwellcome assignment combine to make the journey intolerable for both parties, but in the course of their travel the circumstances

inspiring their attitudes emerge. A year previously, Rose's husband died in a car crash, and it is the pain of being unable to help fatally injured accident victims that has disillusioned Spider. They discover other, unexpected similarities in their experiences of lean-tos in the Depression and squats by the unemployed in the present, and gradually a grudging respect grows on each side. When their ambulance crashes and Spider suffers a broken leg, Rose takes the wheel and gives him her walking stick. However, as in the case of *Over the Hill*, reaching the first destination does not complete the journey. Rose's family do not want her to live with them and plan to put her into a home. Leaving them but also turning down the offer of an alternative partnership with a widower she met *en route*, Rose sets out on the road on her own, leaving Spider to return to the city as best he can. Although the age differences between characters in these films are unusual, their narratives utilise the road movie motif of formative, symbolic travel quite conventionally. The travellers and those they meet undergo changes. Rose and Alma gain insight into their own weaknesses and mistakes, and their determination affects those with whom they travel (Spider and Dutchy). Their family crises are admitted and addressed, if not always resolved, and the freedom of the road (even for those of pensionable age) is asserted unequivocally. The opinions and experiences of one generation throw the assumptions and life style of the other into perspective, without sentimentalisation of the young or old.

An unabashed popular youth appeal is discernible in other Australian road movies, in emulation of the violence and momentum of comparable American films. *Kiss or Kill* (Bill Bennett, 1997) and *Heaven's Burning* (Craig Lahiff, 1997) depict criminal odysseys across the Australian landscape by young couples on the run from the law, but ally contemporary issues and aspects of Australian Gothic to their conventional, commercial impetus. In *Kiss or Kill*, Alan and Nicole flee from Adelaide after committing a series of robberies and acquiring an incriminating video tape. They are followed across country by detectives and an ageing football star, who is featured on the tape and fearful of blackmail. The couple's route is exposed by a trail of murder victims. The crimes may have been committed by either Alan (who cannot explain where he gets the money to finance their escape) or by Nicole (who sleepwalks and cannot account for her actions). Their suspicion of each other heightens as the chase continues. The couple's paranoia finds a graphic expression in the film's use of jump-cuts, which exaggerate the lacunae in the narrative and engender their (and the viewer's) uncertainty over